

BACK FENCE

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WAR ON TERROR

Veterans Can Play Vital Role On Homefront Battleground

Our military leaders are confident they can win the War on Terror on the battlefields of Iraq, Afghanistan, and smaller engagements around the globe, but they are concerned about the battle for public support on the homefront.

Retired Gen. Frederick Kroesen, in a January opinion piece for *ARMY Magazine*, reflects military leaders' homefront concerns. "The opponents of this war, employing the proven tactics of the Vietnam era, are convincing an ever-increasing number of our citizens that we should declare victory and withdraw," Kroesen wrote. "They are advocating we abandon our interests, confirm a lost battle, and guarantee a longer, wider war as the terrorists proclaim victory over 'the great Satan' and expand their area of operations."

The troops on the ground don't see a lost battle; they see us winning a just cause. In a Christmas interview, Gen. Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, notes the troops on the front lines of the War on Terror believe in the success of their mission. "It is absolutely true," Pace said, "that for those units that have served overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan, their re-enlistment rates are the highest of all of our armed forces . . . and that shows their pride in what they're doing and their understanding of how important it is."

Troops engaged in the conflict write their Congressmen and Senators wondering why reports of U.S. casualties, regular car bombings, and eroding American public support for the war are overshadowing their achievements and sacrifices. It is no wonder public opinion of the war is different from that of the troops on the ground. We are bombarded daily by negative stories.

Same Strategy

I served in Vietnam in 1968-69 and experienced similar feelings. I recall reading newspapers from home describing roads closed by the enemy on such and such days, and I had driven down the same roads on those days with no problems. The press takes the attitude that "if it bleeds it leads." I believe negative reporting that focused on the bad and ignored our success was a major factor in contributing to a loss of con-



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fidence in our Vietnam War efforts. Our enemies focused on extending the war, increasing casualties, and eroding the confidence on the homefront to prevail when they knew they could not win a military victory. Our enemies today are employing the same strategy: not having the ability to win the war but creating gory footage for the nightly news to erode our resolve.

We cannot afford a repeat of the Vietnam experience. Even in our wildest expectations in the Sixties we never expected Viet Cong sampans to come up the Hudson River and shell New York City. Our adversaries in the War on Terror have already visited New York City. We cannot afford to lose this war — victory is the only option.

Veterans are needed to win the War on Terror on the key homefront battleground. Veterans can make a difference in this war. This is especially true in Virginia — a state with 750,000 veterans. We can make a difference.

Supporting Servicemen Overseas

There are several ways we veterans can support our comrades in the field.

— *Join a veterans' organization.* Numbers matter and your membership in a veterans' organization makes that organization's voice stronger on issues such as the American Legion's resolution in support of the War on Terror.

— *Encourage your veterans' organizations to invite speakers with recent service in Iraq and Afghanistan.* Hear the views from the troops and spread their firsthand views to your family and friends. We need to tell the troops' side of the story. In January, I attended a Military Officers Association of America dinner and heard a report from the Virginia-based 80th Division leadership on their members in Iraq. It was a story of high morale, pride in mission, and a sense of accomplishment.

— *Write letters to the editor to give your views.* Take advantage of the opportunities afforded by all local daily and weekly papers. There is another side of this war that must get out to our fellow citizens if we are to win the critical battle on the homefront.

— *Display your veteran's status.* Recently the Army Chief of Staff sent many Army veterans U.S. Army pins and asked us to wear them to show our public solidarity with the soldiers in the field. He also sent out bumper stickers to parents of serving soldiers, "Proud Parent of a Soldier." I have one on my car.

— *Participate in events to honor our military and veterans — particularly those who have paid the ultimate price.* Be there on Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Veterans Day. Shortly after the showing of "Saving Private Ryan" we had a tremendous upsurge in participation in events recognizing those who served and those serving. We need to sustain this sign of patriotism and support for our military in harm's way. Veterans can set the example for fellow citizens.

The Greatest Generation did its duty on the homefront in World War II. We have not been asked to make the same level of sacrifice at home for this war. It is just as crucial to our nation's survival that we win this war. We have already been attacked on our home soil with some 3,000 dead. We are concerned about future attacks. Virginia veterans can lead the way in supporting our troops in the field and winning the all-important homefront battle. We cannot afford to lose.

■ *Bill Flanagan — a retired Army Colonel and Vietnam veteran, with an Army son and USMC son-in-law engaged in the War on Terror — has served on the Virginia War Memorial Foundation's Board of Trustees, is president of the state leadership of the Military Officers Association of America, and is a member of several other veterans' organizations. His Commentary Columns regarding veterans will appear regularly on the Back Fence.*

A series of Back Fence columns beginning today will feature views of military veterans and the contributions veterans make to the community. Writers will be Bill Flanagan; a retired Army Colonel, Connie O'Neill; a retired Captain in the U.S. Navy, Paul Galanti, a retired Navy Commander and former Vietnam POW; and John Montgomery, a West Point graduate, former Airborne Ranger, and a Major in the Individual Ready Reserve.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO COMMONWEALTH

Through Actions, Commitment Military Veterans Love Virginia

My purpose is to inform you of what military veterans and the veterans' organizations contribute not only to the enrichment and betterment of Virginia as a Commonwealth but also to our fellow Virginia friends and neighbors.

After retirement from the U.S. Navy, I served for 13 years as the Virginia State Adjutant of the American Legion. So I will write primarily about Legion community programs in explaining what military veterans do at the local community level. (There are other military veterans' groups that have great programs, but I am more familiar with the Legion's.) After describing the community activities, I'll go into the eye-opening monetary contributions, via the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, that veterans provide the Commonwealth.

I'll follow this by trying to put into words some of the intangible contributions that we make. You will see that military veterans truly love Virginia.

The American Legion Baseball program and the American Legion Boys State program (and the Ladies Auxiliary Girls State program) are probably the most famous statewide programs for young people, having the greatest influence on the teenagers of Virginia. Thousands of boys and girls participate annually. The baseball program not only produces its share of Major Leaguers, but it also, and more importantly, produces the values of good sportsmanship and camaraderie among teenage boys throughout the state.

Engaging Teens in Politics

The Boys State program long has been acclaimed by Virginia Governors, State Senators, and Delegates for its high level of hands-on education and instruction in Virginia politics. A chosen few go to D.C. for Boys Nation, where national policies and politics are studied and practiced. U.S. Presidents always have found time to speak to the boys.

For many years the American Legion has sponsored the statewide oratorical contest that chal-



One of the community projects of the American Legion is the Boys State Program, an oratorical contest challenging participants to provide their views on the Constitution.

lenges boys and girls to provide their views of the U.S. Constitution, with winners receiving significant college scholarship grants. In recent years our traditional Boys State and oratorical contest programs have been enhanced by the Junior Shooting sports program (air rifles), and, with the cooperation of the Virginia State Police, the Junior Law Cadet program. We believe all these programs have become significant contributors in helping Virginia's teenagers find a more values-oriented path toward adulthood.

These community programs, and more, are financially supported by the many Legion posts around Virginia to the tune of \$250,000, with an additional \$130,000 for all other children and youth programs (such as medical and hospital care for children of needy families). Fund-raising efforts provide much of this money.

So: We are great with kids and are generous in our financial support thereof. But I should also emphasize the bottom line. A billion — yes, I said *billion* — of hard dollars that military veterans bring to Virginia's coffers eventually benefit all Virginians.

Some Staggering Statistics

Here are some key facts:

— There are 750,000 military veterans living in Virginia (No. 11 in the U.S.).
— Twelve percent of Virginia's veterans receive U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) benefits.
— USDVA fiscal 2004 expenditures in Virginia were \$1.795 billion (No. 10 in the U.S.). Yes, that's \$1.795 *billion*. This is broken down by disability compensation, health care, and educational benefits.

— U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) retired military pay to Virginia veterans: \$4 billion (No. 4 in the U.S., and 9.5 percent of total DOD retired pay).

And, ladies and gentlemen of Virginia, you can assume that the vast percentage of this retired pay and benefits is spent in Virginia. I know mine is.

But there is something more than the dollars and cents and volunteer hours that veterans contribute to Virginia — something of intangible yet real significance.

Veterans have devoted much of their time in military service enduring many hardships, and often risking life and limb in service to their country. They learned valuable lessons in leading men, taking and obeying orders, and all the while developing a hard-earned work ethic. They also have acquired — especially in recent years — technological skills readily adaptable for civilian use.

Military veterans stand ready to share these lessons, skills, and ethics not only for their own benefit — and although they might not realize it — but also for the benefit of the entire Commonwealth.

So there it is: no-cost volunteer work, lots of federal money, and a motivated, talented, and experienced workforce — all for you, Virginia, on a silver platter.

Next up: Does Virginia love its military veterans? Stay tuned.

■ *A retired Captain in the U.S. Navy and a Vietnam veteran, Connie O'Neill served as the Virginia State Adjutant of the American Legion from 1988 to 2001. O'Neill chaired the Board of Veterans Affairs in the Allen administration and was appointed to the Joint Leadership Council, comprising 22 veterans organizations and 200,000 veterans, by Governor Mark Warner — in 2004 being elected the group's chairman. His Commentary Columns regarding veterans will appear regularly on the Back Fence.*

■ *Editor's note: The following is excerpted from remarks Andrew Young — a former mayor of Atlanta, UN Ambassador, and Congressman — gave at VMI on March 23 after receiving VMI's Jonathan M. Daniels Humanitarian Award. (A member of VMI's Class of 1961, Daniels was killed in 1965 in Hayneville, Alabama, promoting the civil rights of African-Americans.)*

LEXINGTON.

It is indeed an honor and a privilege to be able to stand before you citizen-soldiers called by Jonathan Daniels to be saints. . . .

I studied George Marshall when I was about 15. I had to do a paper and someone suggested that I look up the Marshall Plan — and it was an experience that has shaped

my life. What we are trying to do right now in Africa is fulfill, in the developing world, the kind of vision that George Marshall established at the end of the Second World War that has made Europe and Asia a successful part of our global economy. This was not done without vision, without a tremendous amount of courage, and without a kind of sacrificial commitment. . . . It was a death of the American ego and the beginning of a heroic vision which could only come from a citizen-soldier with the military credentials of a George Marshall.

And so you stand in that tradition, and Jonathan Daniels put me in that position for following in the footsteps of Martin Luther King. We were attempting to fulfill the vision of peace, brotherhood, and reconciliation of historic racial differences — and to do so without violence. Jonathan Daniels embraced that as did Martin Luther King, and he knew as did George Marshall on the battlefield that even though we were committed to non-violence, that he was coming into an area that was known for its violence. Black women and men had been killed, thrown in the lakes and rivers, and forgotten and ignored. If Jonathan Daniels had not agreed to join in with us, it might still be going on.

When we attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965, we were beaten back. Two people were killed — that day the Rev. James Reeb, and a week later Mrs. Viola Liuzzo. . . . This was such a determined commitment on the part of Jonathan Daniels and then Father [Richard] Morrisroe. They were there not just as individuals. They brought the conscience of the church with them and they brought with that conscience a kind of power of good that lies within us all.

There is a battle going within each of us. Yes, we are called on to be saints, but there is one hell of a lot of devil in everybody. And on any given day you don't know what's liable to prevail. But Jonathan Daniels stood up to represent the saintly America — the best that America and VMI [have] to offer, the valedictorian, someone with a tremendous future who put it all at stake — and all was required. His life was required, but all of us are beneficiaries.

Price for Progress

The only thing that disturbs me about the progress and prosperity that we enjoy as a nation is that most people don't realize that it was bought with a price — that without Martin Luther King's death, without Jonathan Daniels' death, without all of the other unmerited suffering of hundreds, indeed thousands, of citizens who determined that they were going to change America for the better and that they were not going to overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good, that has changed the world. It is the tradition of George Marshall; it is in the tradition of Martin Luther King and of Jonathan Daniels. . . .

I'm talking about sacrifice. I'm talking about risk. I'm talking about death, because it is something we can't avoid. During the civil rights movement I was always nervous and Martin Luther King would always sense that, and the way he dealt with your nervousness was to start pointing you out and saying,

"Yes, I know they are after me and I know that I've got to go, but they are going to catch you instead. You will be jumping in front of the camera trying to get your picture taken and you will take the bullet." And then he said, "Don't worry, I will preach the best funeral that anybody ever had." . . . [B]efore long he would turn a moment of death into a moment of joy and celebration and life. He always said you don't have to worry about death — everybody is going to die. The only thing you have to decide is what you are going to die for. And he said you are better off out here dying for something worthwhile than you are getting hit by a truck. . . .

Jonathan Daniels didn't [waste a talented and creative and brilliant life in the pursuit of absurdity]. Jonathan Daniels stood in the tradition of freedom. He stood in the tradition of love. He stood in the tradition of Jesus of Nazareth. . . .

When I see the skyscrapers of Atlanta; when I see the young black people coming out of colleges and universities, joining major corporations, building big churches, building homes, and going to the finest universities in the world; when I see them making contributions that are unimagined — I realize that would not have been possible without the sacrifice, the love, and the death of others.

I don't know what the future holds in Iraq, but I know that those young men and women — who are there whether they are there for right reasons or wrong reasons as far as they are concerned — are there for the freedom, for the dignity, and for the preservation of opportunity in a world of freedom. It is misunderstood. It is misinterpreted. It is distorted by all kinds of critics, but nothing can defile the purity of their sacrifice — for they are doing the best that is available to carve out of the tragedy and humiliation all the confusion of centuries of bad politics in the Middle East. They are there to try to create harmony. Ultimately it must be created in the manner of George Marshall. . . .

Dream Big

We will be able, as Martin used to say, to hew out of this mountain of despair a stone of hope, and somehow that stone of hope will come from the leadership of your classes. It will come from the vision that you bring to a troubled world. It will come from the example that you followed from your classmate who would now be an elder statesman if he had not answered the call and run the risk and given his life that we might all have a better life. I am one of those idealists, one of those visionaries who believes that if you can conceive it and believe it, you can achieve it.

'Impossible Dreams'

I'm not saying that you will be successful. I'm not saying people will reward you. But I am saying that if you give your life to some impossible dream, you will be amazed at how many of them come true.

Birmingham and Selma were impossible dreams; and even as we marched from Selma to Montgomery, if I had said to Martin Luther King, "You know I want to be mayor of Atlanta one day, but I would also like to go to Congress and maybe serve at the United Nations . . .," he would have said, "Boy, you are really crazy. This won't happen in your lifetime. It might happen in the lives of our grandchildren." But even the dreamer of the 20th century could not see the dreams that we have already realized in the 21st. And so, I say to you: Dream big. Dream big and run big risks! Don't be afraid or ashamed of failure. And above all, never fear death. You don't have anything to say about it. It is inevitable. That is the one certain factor of your life. The only thing you have is a choice of what it is that you will give your life for. Make great choices as Jonathan did, as Martin did. . . .

And the world is a better place because people of this institution and those to come have been willing to give their lives for noble and glorious dreams. This is a wonderful, glorious tradition. It is the best of the Christian tradition. It says where there is no cross there is no crown. But it also says that where there are crosses there will be resurrections, and the dreams and the promises of God will be fulfilled in and through your life, your vision, your service, and, indeed, your suffering in death if it so be required.